

Find Your Brexit Zen in 2019

By Nigel Taylor, Visiting Industry Fellow with the Centre for Brexit Studies

2018 has been ‘the year of the insult’ and to be honest it’s beginning to grip my grinner. I voted to leave, and if I chose to believe everything said about me and others it appears I am now a racist, a gammon (being white & middle-age), misogynistic (alas, I am male), stupid/ignorant of the ‘facts’ (working class) and of course – a Fascist (Conservative).

This has been a conversation in our office for some time now, where Leave and Remain work side by side. We disagree often – but we remain courteous and respectful toward each other. Recent events have only served to highlight the trend in using insults as a common form of discourse. Jeremy Corbyn’s slur toward Theresa May only being the tip of an iceberg of bile. Watch your thoughts lest they become your words.

My perspective is skewed as a ‘leaver’ and I am under no impression this nastiness flows both ways, but by way of example; Julia Hartley-Brewer was interviewed By Sky News, along with Polly Toynbee. What was striking was Toynbee’s reference to Hartley-Brewer as ‘far-right’. We all know that this is a passive-aggressive swipe inferring HB is in some way a Fascist. Incensed, HB later confronted Toynbee who weakly described a ‘Parliamentary far-right’ to which HB belonged – but the dig was already in, on national television.[\[1\]](#)

Amandeep SinghBhogal is a Conservative campaigner. He is pro-Brexit and has experienced a torrent of abuse for his views and one only need scroll through his twitter feed to find it. As a British Indian, he has been described by individuals denoting themselves as Remainers as ‘one of the Jewish Cappos who helped put the Jews in the gas chambers’, and he has also had his ‘blackness’ called out; ‘an Indian man with a turban, aiding & siding with the racist, xenophobic, tax doggers (dodgers methinks, interesting premise though) – seems like your trying to fit in’.

Anna Soubry was accosted in Westminster by Brexiters, who proudly videoed themselves verbally abusing her en masse. Perhaps more disturbing was the physical closeness of these angry people to Ms. Soubry. It was uncomfortable viewing.

If insulting people directly isn't bad enough – how about implying that anyone who voted for Brexit, or is part of planning it as part of their day job, should never be employed again? Andrew Adonis tweeted recently that he “value(s) an impartial civil service – but I doubt I would employ anyone in future who had been a part of planning for Brexit, particularly those engaged in ‘no deal’ preparations”. Andrew is taking names, it looks like Santa isn't the only one with a list.

If we were in the playground, we could argue who started it. But let's not. Let us in fact draw a line under this pernicious and now pervasive form of discourse.

You see, I like a debate and I don't mind some humour and banter thrown in. I understand the motivations and passion on both sides of Brexit; as the great Mel Brooks said, “everything we do in life is based on fear, especially love”. But I've been in street fights. I know where the line is.

I've not been above lobbing a metaphorical grenade over the wall from time-to-time. I must try harder.

So, if 2018 has been the year of the insult let us find our Brexit zen and aim to make 2019 the ‘year of respect’. Naive and aspirational I know, many would say ‘toughen up’ – this is a fight. But the cold reality is if the insults continue to flow there will be an ‘arms race’ of disrespect. Whatever the post-Brexit scenario is, the damage will have been done for years to come.

Enough of this Kumbaya nonsense. Perhaps I am completely wrong about this and those great philosophers, the Young Ones, understood the British psyche better:

Rick: Guys! Guys! Look at us! Squabbling, bickering, like children! What's happening to us? We never used to be like this!

Vyvyan: Yes we did.

Mike: Yeah, he's right, Rick. We've always been like this.

This blog is written in a personal capacity and does not necessarily reflect the views of Centre for Brexit Studies or Birmingham City University.

[1] <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/1061250/Brexit-news-UK-EU-latest-deal-vote-Theresa-May-far-right-Sky-News-row>